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ABSTRACT

Recently, the topic of reflection and the development of reflective practitioners have received a great deal of attention. Four elements are central to critical reflection: assumption analysis, contextual awareness, imaginative speculation, and reflective skepticism. Definitions of critical reflection often reveal differing theoretical orientations about reflection and have resulted in confusion about its meaning and uses. Lack of a common definition has also led to interchangeable use of the terms "reflection" and "critical reflection." The ideas of Dewey, Schon, and Mezirow are frequently mentioned in discussions of the origin of reflection in education; however, only Mezirow seems to emphasize the critical nature of reflection. Two issues that emerge in the literature on critical reflection are the effect on students who are encouraged to engage in critical reflection and the kind of teaching that supports critical reflection. Studies have concluded the following: critical reflection can lead to self-doubt, feelings of isolation, and uncertainty; adult learners who engage in activities to facilitate critical reflection must be supported in their efforts; and teaching students to be critically reflective can be a rewarding experience that results in critical reflection on the part of the instructor. (A 23-item annotated bibliography constitutes approximately 75% of this document.) (MN)

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Teaching Critical Reflection
Trends and Issues Alerts

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TRENDS AND ISSUES ALERTS
by Susan Imel 1998
ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Teaching Critical Reflection

Recently, a great deal of attention has been devoted to the topic of reflection and to the development of reflective practitioners. By itself, however, reflection is not necessarily critical (Brookfield 1995; Ecclestone 1996). To engage in critical reflection requires "moving beyond the acquisition of new knowledge and understanding, into questioning [of] existing assumptions, values, and perspectives" (Cranton 1996, p. 76). Four elements are central to critical reflection: assumption analysis, contextual awareness, imaginative speculation, and reflective scepticism (Brookfield 1988, p. 325). Assisting adults in undertaking critical reflection is a frequently espoused aim of adult education (e.g., Bright 1996; Brookfield 1994; Collins 1991; Millar 1991) but it is a goal that is not easily achieved. This *Alert* identifies some of the trends and issues related to teaching adults to be critically reflective.

Definitions that reveal differing theoretical orientations about reflection have resulted in confusion about its meaning and uses (Mackintosh 1998). Lack of a common definition has also led to the interchangeable use of the terms *reflection* and *critical reflection* that may "tacitly belie the different ideologies which can underpin reflective practice" (Ecclestone 1996, p. 150). When discussing the origins of reflection in education, the ideas of Dewey, Schön, and Mezirow are most frequently mentioned (Cranton 1996; Mackintosh 1998), but only Mezirow seems to emphasize the critical nature of reflection (Cranton 1996; Mezirow et al. 1991; Taylor 1998). When adult educators write about critical reflection, they frequently cite critical reflection as an element of Mezirow's work on transformative learning (Taylor 1998).

The effect on students who are encouraged to engage in critical reflection is another issue that emerges in the literature. The phrase "tales from the dark side" (Brookfield 1994, p. 1) is used to describe the experiences of a group of adult education graduate students who engaged in activities designed to foster critical reflection. They found that critical reflection led to self-doubt, feelings of isolation, and uncertainty. Critical reflection in a group context can also be unsettling as described by Haddock (1997), who "was confronted and challenged by others . . . [and who then found it] difficult to avoid examining personal values and the extent to which they affect attitudes, beliefs and ideas which one holds on to" (p. 382). Adult learners who engage in activities to facilitate critical reflection must be supported in their efforts.

Another issue related to the experiences of students who engage in critical reflection has to do with the kind of teaching that supports critical reflection. As described by Foley (1995) and Millar (1991), it is labor intensive and may require restructuring of existing curricula. Also, not all learners may be predisposed to engage in critical reflection, which can be problematic. Teachers should also be prepared to support adult learners as they struggle with the dark side of critical reflection, a role that they may find uncomfortable.

Teaching adults to be critically reflective can be a rewarding experience that results in critical reflection on the part of the instructor. The resources that follow provide further information about this process.

Resources

Astor, R.; Jefferson, H.; and Humphrys, K. "Incorporating the Service Accomplishments into Pre-Registration Curriculum to Enhance Reflective Practice." *Nurse Education Today* 18 (1998): 567-575.

Offers a framework for reflection that promotes an outlook that is both objective and subjective, based on Mezirow's six levels of reflection and O'Brien's five service accomplishments.

Bright, B. "Reflecting on 'Reflective Practice.'" *Studies in the Education of Adults* 28, no. 2 (October 1996): 162-184.

Elaborates on issues in reflective practice: efficient inefficient reflection, contemplation versus reflection, knowledge and action, informal theories, inquiry and self-reflexive inquiry, error detection, and single-loop and double-loop learning.

Brookfield, S. "Developing Critically Reflective Practitioners: A Rationale for Training Educators of Adults." In *Training Educators of Adults: The Theory and Practice of Graduate Adult Education*, edited by S. Brookfield. New York: Routledge, 1988.

Proposes a rationale for training critically reflective adult educators that includes an overview of adult learning, a discussion of adult learning and critical thinking, and methods of graduate adult education.

Brookfield, S. "On Ideology, Pillage, Language and Risk: Critical Thinking and Tensions of Critical Practice." *Studies in Continuing Education* 13, no. 1 (1991): 1-14.

Undertakes an analysis of the debates about critical analysis as a rationale for conceptualization and practice of adult education. Four areas of tension for adult educators engaged in critical practice are discussed.

Brookfield, S. "Breaking the Code: Engaging Practitioners in Critical Analysis of Adult Educational Literature." *Studies in the Education of Adults* 25, no. 1 (April 1993): 64-91.

Describes a process and poses questions that can be used in assisting practitioners reflect critically on adult education literature.

Brookfield, S. "Tales from the Dark Side: A Phenomenography of Adult Critical Reflection." *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 13, no. 3 (May-June 1994): 203-216.

Provides an analysis of how one group of adults felt as a result of their critical reflection; five themes emerged: impostorship, cultural suicide, lost innocence, road running, and community.

Brookfield, S. *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995.

Describes what critical reflection is and why it is so important as well as how educators can foster transformative learning by their students through the use of critical reflection.

Cheetham, G., and Chivers, G. "The Reflective (and Competent) Practitioner: A Model of Professional Competence which Seeks to Harmonise the Reflective Practitioner and Competence-based Approaches." *Journal of European Industrial Training* 22, no. 2 (1998): 267-276.

Offers a revised model of professional competence that attempts to synchronize the reflective practitioner paradigm with competence-based approaches. The revision takes into account suggestions made by a significant number of respondents, as well as observations from empirical work.

Collins, M. *Adult Education as Vocation*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Chapter seven of this book advocates the development of a transformative pedagogy that could lead to critical practice. Included are discussions of the promise and limitations of critical theory and of alternatives to a noncritical practice.

Cranton, P. *Professional Development as Transformative Learning: New Perspectives for Teachers of Adults*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.

Discusses critical reflection as a central process in transformative learning. Included are strategies for critical reflection for use in professional development.

Doran, F. M., and Cameron, C. C. "Hearing Nurses' Voices through Reflection in Women's Studies." *Nurse Education Today* 18 (1998): 64-71.

Describes common themes identified from a learning process designed to incorporate reflective processes in a women's studies course. Students were required to analyze critically the effect the subject had on their lives both professionally and personally.

Ecclestone, K. "The Reflective Practitioner: Mantra or a Model for Emancipation?" *Studies in the Education of Adults* 28, no. 2 (October 1996): 146-161.

As National Vocational Qualifications are advocated for professional development, reflective practice takes on an increasingly narrow and technical focus. The focus and purposes of reflection must be made more explicit and the range and scope of reflection much wider if emancipatory discourse is to thrive.

Foley, G. "Coming to Grips with Complexity in the Formation of Reflective Practitioners." *Canadian Journal of Studies in Adult Education* 9, no. 2 (November 1995): 55-70.

Discusses an approach to teaching designed to help adult educators both to analyze the complexities of their work and to devise ways of acting that are both effective and congruent with their values. Although some of the adult education literature supports this approach, changes in the political economy make it increasingly difficult to teach in the way described.

Haddock, J. "Reflecting in Groups: Contextual and Theoretical Considerations within Nurse Education and Practice." *Nurse Education Today* 17 (1997): 381-385.

The use of action learning groups in nursing education to facilitate reflective practice may cause distress and anxiety from self-analysis. Attention to nursing context, group processes, and the theoretical basis of group work may be necessary.

King, J. "Pushing for Deeper Reflection: Planning and Facilitating Practitioner Research." *Vision: Literacy South's Newsletter for Participatory Literacy Practitioners in the Southeast* 9, no. 1 (Summer 1997): 1, 4-5, 7.

Describes the lessons learned as a facilitator in the process of encouraging reflective thinking and critical analysis. Includes descriptions of strategies and techniques used.

Mackintosh, C. "Reflection: A Flawed Strategy for the Nursing Profession." *Nurse Education Today* 18 (1998): 553-557.

Reflection as defined by Dewey, Mezirow, and Schön is analyzed. Because reflection has no clear or universal definition, the author concludes that reflection is a fundamentally flawed strategy that must be of limited benefit to the nursing profession.

Mezirow, J. et al. *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.

This book suggests methods and program approaches for precipitating and fostering transformative learning in the context of the classroom. At the heart of Mezirow's theory of transformative learning is the ability to reflect critically on underlying assumptions.

Michelson, E. "Usual Suspects: Experience, Reflection and the (En)gendering of Knowledge." *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 15, no. 6 (November-December 1996): 438-454.

Discusses the distinction made in adult learning theory between experience and reflection, in which experience is treated as the raw material for learning and reflection as a highly cognitive process in which learning actually takes place. Argues for a reconfiguration of the relationship between experience and reflection.

Millar, C. "Critical Reflection for Educators of Adults: Getting a Grip on the Scripts for Professional Action." *Studies in Continuing Education* 13, no. 1 (1991): 15-23.

Describes an approach to teaching a graduate course in adult education that promotes the development of critical reflective practitioners. Four major orientations of technological, humanist, liberal, and radical are used as the basis for examining practice.

Taylor, E. W. *The Theory and Practice of Transformative Learning: A Critical Review. Information Series no. 374*. Columbus: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Center on Education and Training for Employment, College of Education, the Ohio State University, 1998.

Reviews over 40 empirical and theoretical works on transformative learning, the process of making meaning from experience. Identifies unresolved issues and outlines the essential practices—one of which is critical reflection—and conditions for fostering transformative learning in adulthood.

Vaske, J. M. "Defining, Teaching, and Evaluating Critical Thinking Skills in Adult Education." Educational specialist thesis, Drake University, 1998.

This study examined adult educators' perceptions of components related to critical thinking, including definitions of critical thinking, instructional methods used for teaching critical thinking, and methods of measuring students' growth in critical thinking. Respondents were adult educators who teach graduate adult education courses. Results led to development of a conceptual framework of critical thinking for adult educators.

Wellington, B. "Orientations to Reflective Practice." *Educational Research* 38, no. 3 (Winter 1996): 307-316.

Five orientations to reflective practice—the immediate, the technical, the deliberative, the dialectic, and the transpersonal—are described and discussed. The five orientations are depicted as interactive, interdependent aspects of reflective practice and are used to develop a conceptual framework for research and practice.

Williamson, A. "Reflection in Adult Learning with Particular Reference to Learning-in-Action." *Australian Journal of Adult and Community Education* 37, no. 2 (July 1997): 93-99.

Argues for the importance of reflection for learning-in-action and the need to communicate reflections to oneself and to others through writing. The use of a journal is advocated.

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